

NATIVE AMERICANS ON FISHERS ISLAND

*History and Archaeology
circa 9,000 B.C. to A.D. 1600*



*by Marion Ferguson Briggs
Illustrated by Charles B. Ferguson*



The Henry L. Ferguson Museum
Fishers Island, New York

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*Written in 1976 for the Henry L. Ferguson Museum
Revised and updated 2020*



The Henry L. Ferguson Museum

PO Box 554 • Fishers Island, New York 06390
www.fergusonmuseum.org • fimuseum@fishersisland.net
631-788-7239

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is intended to educate the general public about what life was like for the people who lived on Fishers Island before Europeans arrived.

“Prehistory” refers to times before people kept written records. Archaeology uncovers clues about past people: who they were, where they came from, why they came, what they made, how they lived, and with whom they traded.

The first recorded Native American artifact on Fishers Island was a grooved stone axe a plow turned up in about 1895. A few years later, a Mr. W. W. Holmes of Waterbury, Connecticut, collected some artifacts on the Island, but the first systematic artifact collecting began in 1912 with the arrival of Henry L. Ferguson. As an amateur archaeologist, he began excavating shell heaps (middens) and burial sites in 1929 with his good friends Blair S. Williams, William Shirley Fulton, and Harold J. Baker. While he acknowledged that “possibly the results to date lack full scientific value, as proper records have not been kept,” Ferguson published a summary of their findings in *Archeological Exploration of Fishers Island, New York* in 1935. Many of the prehistoric artifacts now in the Henry L. Ferguson Museum were found during this period.

In 1976 the author (Briggs) completed her master’s thesis, which analyzed the sites her grandfather, Henry L. Ferguson, discovered as well as the projectile points (spear and dart points and arrowheads) and pottery he collected. Since there had not yet been any scientific excavations on the Island, we studied what was known about neighboring prehistoric Native Americans on Long Island, the Connecticut shoreline, and Martha’s Vineyard in order to understand how prehistoric Native Americans lived on Fishers Island.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the Fishers Island Archaeological Project, under the direction of Dr. Robert E. Funk, the New York State Archaeologist at that time, and Dr. John E. Pfeiffer, a Connecticut archaeologist, conducted scientific archaeological investigations, including the excavation of over ten sites on the Island and analysis of the artifacts they found. This significant project came about because of a chance meeting between Dr. Funk and Charles



H.L. FERGUSON MUSEUM

Henry L. Ferguson excavating a site on Fishers Island in the 1930s

(“Charlie”) Ferguson in 1983, while Charlie was the president of the Ferguson Museum.

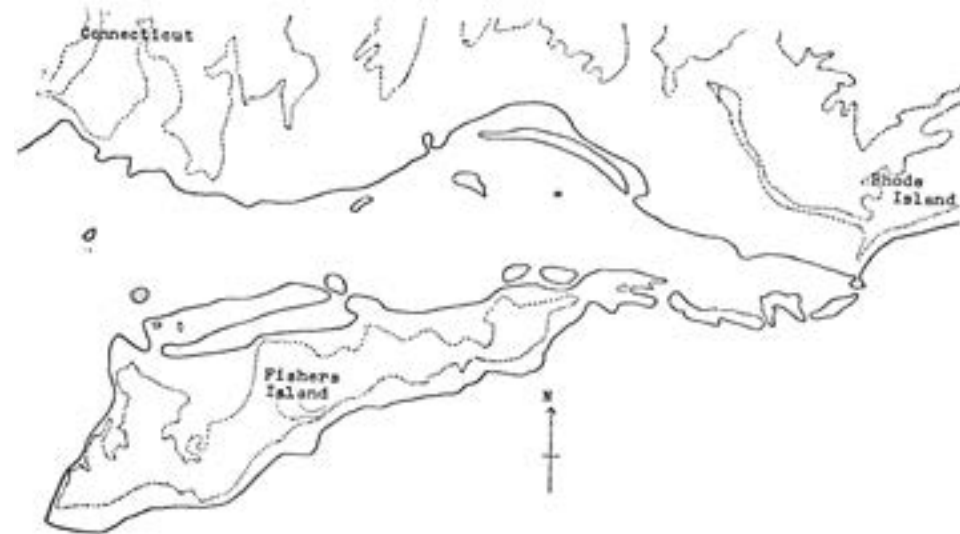
Native Americans visited Fishers Island as early as 9,000 B.C., when nomadic groups hunted small and large animals. Native Americans continued to visit and live on the Island until probably the early 1600s. Over thousands of years, the environment changed, and new ideas arrived through trade networks and migrating peoples. Consequently, the Native Americans’ way of life changed, often gradually but sometimes dramatically.

Archaeologists divide northeastern Native American prehistory into four major periods, each characterized by the way the Native Americans lived: their food and methods of obtaining it, tools, social organization, homes, nomadic or settled ways of living, and religious beliefs. These periods are called the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Transitional (or Terminal Archaic), and Woodland Periods. Artifacts from all but the Paleo-Indian period have been found on Fishers Island and can be seen in the Museum.

IN THE BEGINNING

From about 83,000 to 14,500 B.C., during the last Ice Age, a massive glacier carried tremendous loads of rock, sand, and clay south from northern New England and Canada to what is now Long Island. When the glacier retreated, the debris remained, forming Long Island, Fishers Island, and other nearby islands. Eventually, plants and animals colonized the new land. Because so much seawater was frozen in the ice sheet, the sea level was much lower than it is today; at the height of the glaciation, around 19,000 B.C., sea level was 300 feet below the present level, the Continental Shelf was dry land, and Fishers Island was part of the mainland.

By approximately 7,000 B.C., sea levels had risen to 60 or so feet below current levels, the Long Island Sound basin had been breached by rising sea levels, and the estuary began to develop. Since then, sea level rose rapidly at first and then more slowly, covering low-lying areas. Unfortunately, archaeologists may never discover many of Fishers Island’s oldest sites, since they may now be under water in the harbors and beyond our shores.



Map showing Fishers Island and the nearby Connecticut and Rhode Island coastline thousands of years ago when the sea level was approximately 25 feet lower (solid line). Dotted line shows the present-day outline of the Island and mainland. (Map by M. Briggs)

THE PALEO-INDIAN PERIOD

circa 9,000 to 7,000 B.C.

At the time the earliest Native Americans arrived in the Fishers Island area, the climate was cool and moist, the land was a tundra, the Atlantic Ocean shoreline lay approximately fifty miles to the south, and Fishers Island was a high stretch of land surrounded by valleys. Large game such as caribou, elk and deer roamed these valleys. Fishers "Island" was an ideal camping location for small bands of nomadic hunters; from the highest spots, such as Chocomount Hill, they could see their prey. In addition to hunting large game, they caught smaller mammals, fished, and gathered wild plants to eat. This way of life continued for centuries, though it gradually became less nomadic.

Archaeologists have found no Paleo-Indian artifacts on Fishers Island, but they have discovered a few characteristic "fluted" points on eastern Long Island and in southern Connecticut and Rhode Island, so we know the Paleo-Indians were in the area.



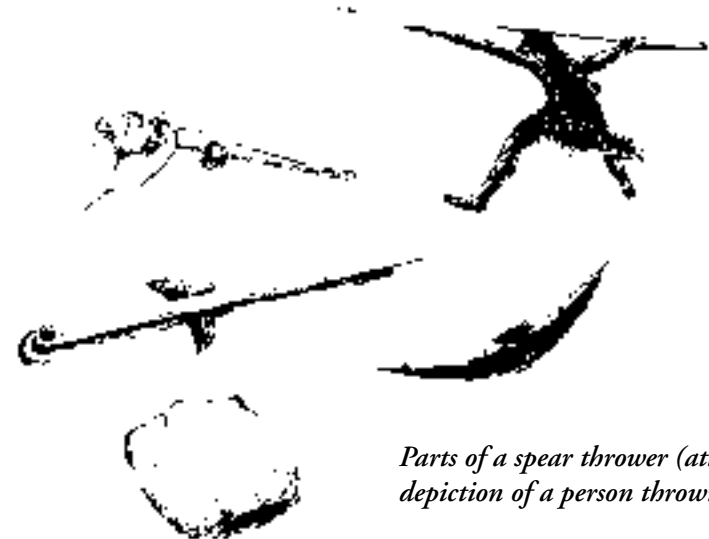
Paleo-Indian fluted point made of flint, circa 9,000 B.C. (not yet found on Fishers Island)

THE ARCHAIC PERIOD

circa 7,000 to 2,000 B.C.

By 7,000 B.C. the caribou had moved north, and the climate had become warmer and drier. A mixed forest of coniferous and deciduous trees replaced the tundra in the early part of the period and was in turn replaced by an oak-chestnut forest similar to what we see today. Native American cultures changed as they adapted to changing environments. The Native Americans of the Archaic Period had no pottery and did not practice agriculture. They efficiently exploited their environment, however, learning to collect and utilize a wide variety of animals and plants for food, clothing and shelter, and making tools from stone, bone, wood, and antler. On Fishers Island, glacial pebbles provided plentiful raw material for stone tools. Fresh water ponds provided drinking water, and hills sheltered the Native Americans from prevailing winds.

During the first several thousand years of the Archaic Period relatively few bands of people lived on or near Fishers Island, although a variety of stone tools, including many projectile point types, have been found on Fishers Island from this time. The earliest points in the Henry L. Ferguson Museum collection date to around 6,000 B.C. All points from the Archaic Period were used as dart points or spearpoints. To project their spears, hunters used a spear thrower or *atlatl*, often weighted with bannerstones (the bow and arrow were not



Parts of a spear thrower (atlatl) and depiction of a person throwing a spear

introduced until sometime between A.D. 500 and 1000). Deer hunting, fishing, and collecting plants were the primary ways of obtaining food.

Around 2,000 to 1,000 B.C. the rate of sea level rise slowed dramatically, to the point that tidal marshes were able to develop and keep pace with sea level rise. A dramatic increase in population occurred in all of coastal Long Island Sound. Fishers Island was already quite well populated, but now the inhabitants could stay on the island longer during the warmer months and focus on coastal resources. In the spring, Native Americans moved from their inland cold-weather hunting camps to the coast. Archaeologists found an increase in the number of coastal sites and the evident duration of occupation during this period.

The Native Americans lived and moved together in small bands of several families, totaling perhaps fifty people. Their houses were probably wigwams constructed of bent saplings covered with woven mats of reeds or bark, and their coastal sites were usually located near tidal inlets and sources of fresh water. Deer hunting, though still important during the winter months at inland camps, was less important at coastal camps, where they could collect many kinds of fish and shellfish. The Native Americans caught fish with nets weighted with pebble net sinkers; examples of these sinkers are in the Museum collection. They cooked and ate all kinds of small land animals: turtles, birds and bird eggs, insects, lizards, snakes, and mammals, including a variety of domestic dog. Since Fishers Island was covered with a deciduous forest by then, the Native Americans could collect nuts from oak, hickory, and chestnut trees. They supplemented this diet with roots, tubers, seeds, and fruits from a wide variety of wetland and terrestrial plants.

When they were not hunting and collecting food, the Archaic Period Native Americans had to do many other chores, and many of the tools they used can be seen in the Museum collection. They used stone scrapers to clean animal hides and made bone needles to sew the hides into clothing, bags, and other useful items. They decorated shells with engraved lines and wore them as pendants. They made drills and knives from stone, as well as tools for cutting down saplings



Making a dugout canoe

for wigwams and trees for dugout canoes. These axes, adzes, and celts were sometimes ground and polished. They made antlers into points or used them as flakers to make stone tools.

The most common projectile points found on Fishers Island date to approximately 2,500 to 1,500 B.C. These narrow-stemmed points are almost always made from quartz pebbles, which can easily be found on our beaches. This “narrow point tradition” was introduced to the Fishers Island Native Americans from the Middle Atlantic region through trade. Some time ago, an Archaic site from this period was discovered on North Hill during a bulldozing operation. At this site, Native Americans had shaped points out of quartz pebbles from the nearby beach using heavier beach stones as hammerstones, leaving quartz flakes and chips on the ground. The artifacts from this site are now in the Museum.

THE TRANSITIONAL (TERMINAL ARCHAIC) PERIOD *circa 2,000 to 1,000 B.C.*

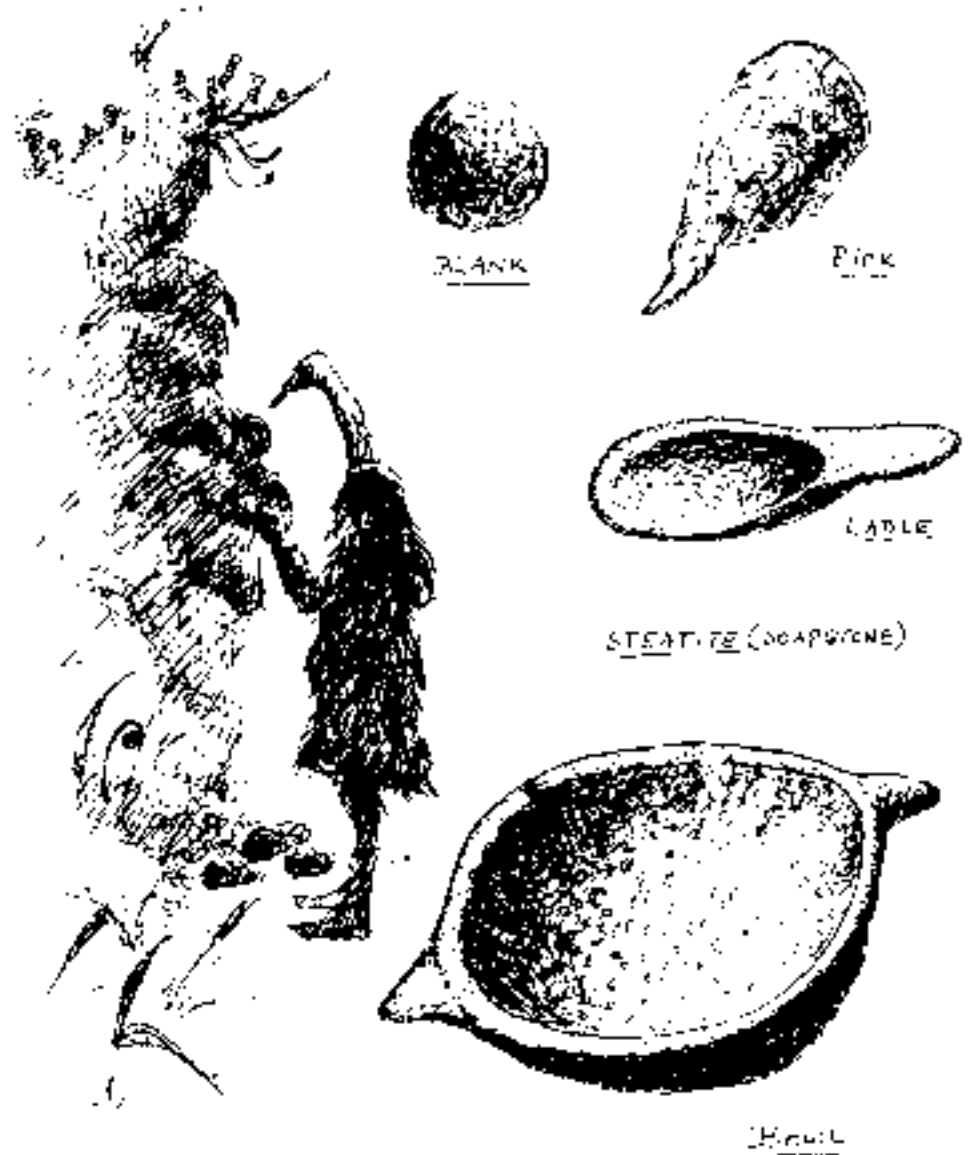
Transitional Period is thus named because it was a time of change from the pre-ceramic, pre-agricultural Archaic Period to the Woodland Period, when pottery and maize (corn) agriculture became part of the culture. Many people moved into the Long Island Sound area during this period, bringing new ideas and fostering change.

Like their ancestors of the Archaic Period, the Transitional Period Native Americans lived as hunters and gatherers. Small bands of 25 to 75 people lived together, moving on foot or by boat from camp to camp depending upon the season and availability of food. They hunted and collected deer, small mammals, an occasional seal, land and shore birds, fish, shellfish, and wild plants. Their hunting weapons were tipped with narrow fishtail-shaped points, called Orient Fishtails, several of which are in the Museum collection. The Native Americans cooked their food in large pots and bowls made of steatite (soapstone), probably imported by boat from southern New England, where there were steatite quarries as near as Narragansett Bay and central Connecticut. These steatite pots, which can be seen in the Museum, were only used during the Transitional Period. They were replaced by the earliest known pottery cooking vessels at the end of the period around 1,000 B.C.



Orient Fishtail point (made of quartz and quartzite)

An elaborate burial ceremonialism developed on both sides of Long Island Sound during this period. On hilltops similar to Hawks Nest Point, the Native Americans dug pits, measuring up to thirty feet long and eight feet wide, in which they buried many individuals together. Some of the bodies may have been placed on scaffolds or buried for some time before the Native Americans gathered up the bones and buried them in bundles. Other bodies were cremated in communal crematoriums before one or more individuals were



Mining steatite (soapstone) and steatite objects

buried in the pits. Into these fires the Native Americans placed food and a wide variety of everyday items, including bowls, points, axes, and fire-making stones—all items they believed the dead would need in the afterlife. Then they placed the burned offerings in the pit with the dead, often mixed with large amounts of powdered red ochre, a mixture of clay and iron oxide. Smaller graves for individuals also contained burial offerings.

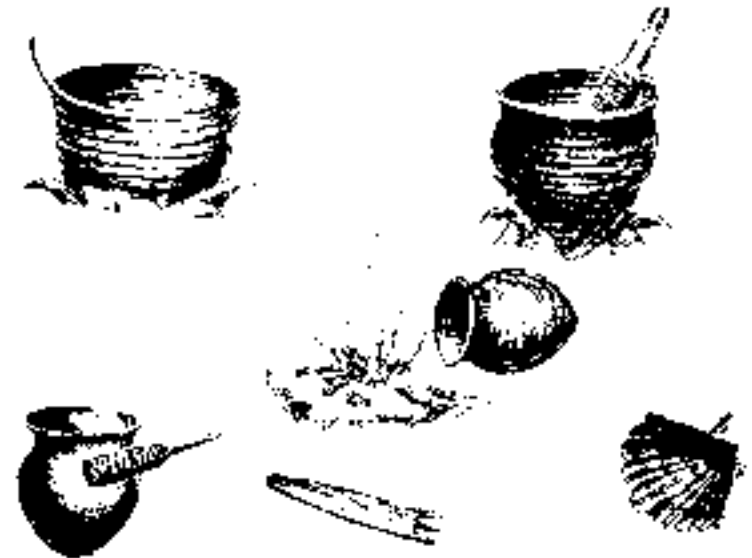
Many artifacts from the Transitional Period have been found on Fishers Island, though no large burial pit has yet been discovered. In the early Woodland Period, practices changed from cremation to burials of individuals, often in a flexed position. Stray burials from the Woodland Period have been found on Fishers Island, usually accompanied by few or no grave goods.

THE WOODLAND PERIOD

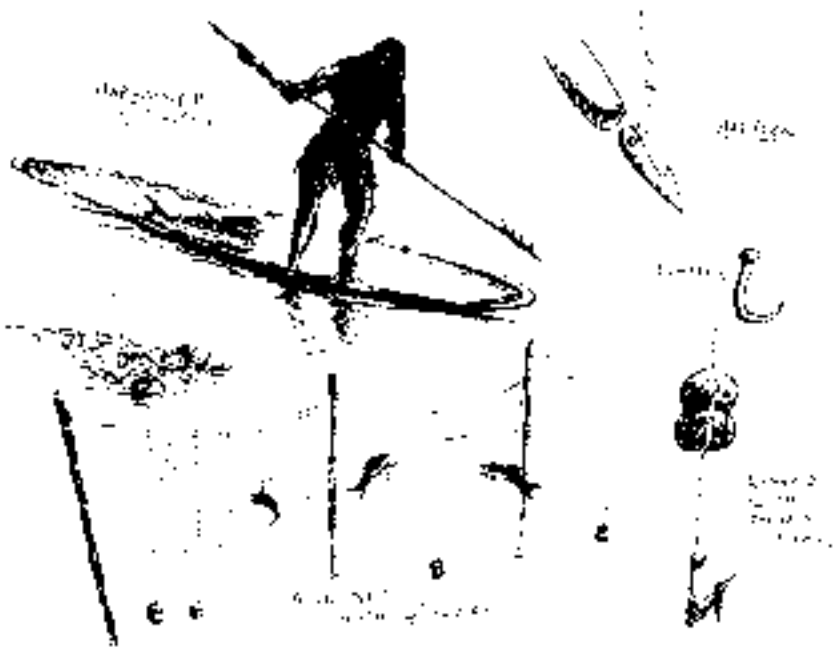
circa 1,000 B.C. to A.D. 1600

Early in the Woodland Period, knowledge of pottery-making was introduced to the Fishers Island area, probably through extensive trade networks. Over the centuries, pottery styles changed, but Fishers Island Native Americans usually made their pots of local clay mixed with shell fragments, both of which are abundant on the Island. They shaped the pots with a cord-wrapped paddle (they did not use a potter's wheel, which was unknown in North America at the time). To finish the exterior surface of the pots, they either brushed the wet clay or impressed it with fabric or netting and then applied decorations with the edge of a scallop shell or a pointed stick. Examples of many pottery styles can be seen in the Museum. The Native Americans used clay pots for cooking and carrying water. They used baskets, often painted with figures of animals, birds, or flowers, for carrying and storing food.

The earliest Woodland culture in New York State was called Meadowood, weakly represented on Long Island but found on Fishers Island. This culture was characterized by the use of the thin, finely-flaked Meadowood side-notched point, the wearing of trapezoidal



Stages of making pottery



Fishing tools

stone ornaments around the neck, smoking pipes of stone and clay, and complex burial rites similar to those of the previous period.

An important influence on the Fishers Island Native Americans during the latter part of the early Woodland Period came from the Ohio Valley, where the Adena culture flourished. These midwestern Native Americans developed an extensive trade network throughout much of eastern North America to obtain exotic materials for their tools and burial offerings. One trade route led to the Atlantic coast, where they obtained marine shells they liked to fashion into beads. Adena points dating to this time, made of stone from the Ohio Valley, have been found on Fishers Island, attesting to the Adena influence on the people of Long Island Sound.

Along with the exchange of points, shell beads, and other material items came the exchange of ideas, and it may have been through the Adena trade network that the northeastern peoples, including the Fishers Islanders, first learned they could plant seeds and grow crops rather than simply picking wild plants. American agriculture originated in Central America around 7,000 years ago and spread northward over several millennia. The cultivation of domesticated plants

was slow to reach the New York and New England region, probably because the shorter growing season here required the development of new, hardy varieties of plants. But a possible population explosion around A.D. 1000 (in the Late Woodland Period) may have made agriculture an essential addition to hunting and gathering.

When the Native Americans in the Fishers Island area began to practice agriculture extensively, they grew corn, beans, squash, and eventually tobacco. Women grew all the crops except tobacco, which men grew for smoking in clay pipes (several of which can be seen in the collection). Crude stone hoes and mortars and pestles, which were used to grind corn, have also been found on the Island. One excavation on Hawks Nest Point discovered a corn storage pit that still contained corn kernels.

It was also around A.D. 1000 that the bow and arrow replaced the dart and spear as the Native Americans' primary hunting weapon. Because the bow and arrow enabled the hunters to ambush their prey and hunt in thick forests with greater facility, they hunted more efficiently and may have rapidly depleted some game animal populations.

During the winter months many Native Americans in the Fishers Island area lived on the mainland and hunted for food. They made arrowheads from stone, bone, antler, horseshoe crab tails, and other materials. They also hunted by trapping, clubbing, snaring and chasing animals into an enclosure, sometimes with the help of their dogs.

In the spring they moved closer to the coast to hunt, fish in the rivers, clear the land, and plant their crops. In the summer months they tended their fields, collected shellfish, gathered wild plants, and fished using nets, bone fishhooks, and harpoons. Stones used to sink nets, fishhooks, and harpoon points can all be seen in the Museum. They lived in semi-permanent villages located near tidal bays and fresh water, sheltered from the prevailing winds. There were 100 people or more in some villages. Houses were wigwams 28 to 30 feet long and 12 to 16 feet wide, covered with bark, skins, or rush mats, with one or two fires inside and holes in the roof to let the smoke out. Archaeological excavations have found evidence that around

A.D. 1400 year-round residents who built such oval wigwams lived at the Stripp/Brickyard site on Fishers Island.

Late in the Woodland Period, Native American tribes (federations of villages) began to quarrel over rights to hunting territories in New England. Warfare led the Native Americans to build fortifications, several of which stood on the Connecticut shore just across the Sound from Fishers Island. There were others on Long Island. They used these forts only when an attack was expected and normally lived outside the forts in their villages. To the best of our knowledge, the tribes never built a fort on Fishers Island, probably because the surrounding water served as a natural defense.

The Pequot Tribe, whom a seventeenth-century historian described as “a very warlike and potent people,” was in power when the first Europeans arrived in the sixteenth century. Much of what we know of the Pequots’ way of life, customs, and beliefs comes from extensive descriptions penned by Europeans. The Pequots had one

chief, or sachem, whose power was based on personal qualities and persuasion and to whom his subjects brought food and gifts. Sachems were most often succeeded by their sons. The other important leader was the powwow, or medicine man, who cured the sick, led religious ceremonies, and sought the intervention of spirits. The Pequots believed in a benevolent power, a malevolent being, and an afterlife. When a person died, he was buried alone, usually with no grave goods, and his wigwam was abandoned and sometimes burned. Men were permitted more than one wife, and divorce was allowed, but adultery was severely punished.

By the time John Winthrop, Jr., moved to the Island with his family in 1646, the once-powerful Pequot Tribe had been defeated by English settlers and their Native American allies during the Pequot War of 1636-38. The Native American occupation of Fishers Island had ended, though Winthrop may have retained some Pequots to work as laborers in the fields and to care for the livestock.



Wigwam at West Harbor circa A.D. 1500

EXCAVATIONS

Drs. Funk and Pfeiffer's scientific investigations on the island over a ten-year period provided radio-carbon dates from around 3,000 B.C. to around A.D. 1600. Some sites they discovered were small workshops where stone tools were made; others were campsites, often with hearths; some were shell middens, where food, tools, and vessels were discarded. At some sites the archaeologists found evidence of houses or wigwams. Several excavations revealed that the Native Americans returned to the same sites over several thousand years, mostly seasonally, and at least one site showed clear evidence of year-round occupation. Two of the most significant sites are described below.

The Stripp/Brickyard site on the north central shore of Fishers Island is the most important site excavated, because it showed intensive occupation for around 5,000 years (from about 3,000 B.C. to the seventeenth century A.D.), and it had excellent preservation. An exhibit showing the stratigraphy of this site can be seen in the Museum.

In the period around 1,000 B.C. Native Americans used this site seasonally, but they planned ahead by leaving behind tools they could use when they returned.

Around A.D. 500 there was a large, multi-family encampment at the site, where the inhabitants made stone-lined hearths for cooking, processed harbor seal skins and meat they had hunted, gathered hickory nuts, and made and repaired stone and bone tools.

The people who lived at the Stripp/Brickyard site around A.D. 1400 lived there year-round in oval wigwams. They had agricultural plots where they grew many plants, including corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers. Archaeologists were surprised to discover that these people made sophisticated pottery, more refined than that of their neighbors, in a style not found on nearby islands.

Sometime during this late period someone living at the site carefully buried a domesticated "Indian" dog. In its stomach the archaeologists found the remains of its last meal: a small cooked blackfish, or tautog. A plaster cast of the burial may be seen in the Museum. Most

Native American households had numerous dogs.

The Sharp site on West Harbor was seasonally occupied for about 2,500 years by small groups of native people. These inhabitants harvested and ate shellfish, mostly soft clams and quahog from the harbor. Their discarded shells, the remains of their meals, and broken pots and tools formed a midden, which grew over the centuries.

Through analyzing the food remains at the site, archaeologists have found that these people ate nuts, fish, deer, woodchuck, raccoons, beavers, ducks, skunks, muskrats, and geese, in addition to shellfish, indicating that they probably lived at the site from late March to November or December. The earliest occupants of the Sharp site were hunters and gatherers. In the later layers of the site, archaeologists found charred corn kernels as well as fragments of pipes, indicating that they were probably growing corn and tobacco nearby.



H.L. FERGUSON MUSEUM

Excavating the Turtle Pond site in May 1993

CONCLUSION

The story of Fishers Island's prehistoric residents is a fascinating one, and we need the help and awareness of today's residents to continue our investigations, increase our knowledge, and preserve what remains of the buried past.

If you find an artifact or group of artifacts, please contact the Henry L. Ferguson Museum to let them know what you found and where you found it so they may take photographs and add the information to their records. If you would like to donate your find to the Museum, they would welcome the addition to the collection.

It is important to carefully record the location of discovery of an artifact or group of artifacts, since artifacts found on the ground may indicate the presence of a buried site nearby; if such a site can be discovered, a scientific excavation may be conducted. When land is cleared or new house foundations dug, those doing the work should be on the lookout for archaeological material and sites. Often, an abundance of shells indicates a site. Bones could be the remains of a Native American burial. The Museum hopes that all archaeological discoveries will be reported quickly so that as much information as possible can be obtained before a site is destroyed. Archaeologists from outside the Fishers Island community are interested in the Island's prehistory and would be willing to help us excavate new sites if any are discovered. We need everyone's help if we are to widen our view of the past.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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My father, Charles B. Ferguson, encouraged me to write this simplified version of my thesis for the general public and drew the explanatory illustrations.

Thanks to Heather Ferguson Burnham for retyping the original manuscript, to Libbie Cook and Ken Edwards for helping with the content of this revision, and to John Wilton for designing this booklet. Finally, Pierce Rafferty deserves a huge thanks for reviewing the text, scanning images and helping with the layout and production of this new version.

This booklet was written in loving memory of two people: Henry L. Ferguson, my grandfather, who inspired me when I was a child to become an archaeologist; and my father, Charlie Ferguson, who encouraged my pursuit of archaeology, who was instrumental in bringing archaeologists to Fishers Island to do the first scientific excavations on the Island, and who enthusiastically took part in those excavations.

—*Marion ("Marnie") Ferguson Briggs*



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Archaeologist's trowel pointing to a projectile point at one of the excavations

